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In the footsteps of Superman

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FISHERSVILLE — As he was being strapped into the seat of the ordinary-looking exercise bike, Ron Halterman's eyes narrowed.

He watched the numbers dance around the black screen in front of him. Wanda Bodkin wrapped his right foot into the pedal with large white Velcro straps. Kate Baxter did the same with his left, sock-covered foot.

In a few minutes, Halterman's legs pedaled the bike while he kept his eyes on the screen.

This wouldn't be extraordinary except that Halterman's legs, along with most of the rest of his body, are paralyzed.

This moment was brought to him by Superman.

Halterman is one of 20 clients at Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center who have used the machine since it was donated by the family of the late Christopher Reeve in November. Reeve played Superman in four movies

"This is a little more physical," Halterman said as he warmed up on the machine. He started using the ERGYS 2 Rehabilitation System in April, working his way up to twice a week.

While the electrodes that are sewn into his customized bike shorts stimulate ordinarily dormant muscles, Halterman's legs take over the motion. Awkward at first, the rhythm steadied and soon Halterman asked for a cup of water. Using such technology not only

fight the atrophy that over time damages muscles, ligaments, bone density and internal organs, but also gives clients like Halterman a true workout.

WWRC has similar technology that helps paraplegics "walk" by using electrodes to make leg muscles move while they move with a specially adapted walker. But the bicycle provides the cardiovascular workout as well.

And when the cardiovascular work begins, his muscles are toned and the general wellness that accompanies a workout ensue.

Kate Baxter, senior physical therapist for clients with spinal cord injuries, said clients are able to use the machine without assistance of WWRC staff once they are adequately trained on the equipment.

Baxter had applied for a grant from the Christopher Reeve Paralysis Foundation last year, but before it was decided, Reeve died.

Since putting clients to work on the machine, Baxter has seen positive reactions, emotionally as well as physically.

"I've seen quite a bit of joy," she said. "We've never had a patient really break down, but sometimes parents do when they see their child move for the first time since they were injured.



Cindy Corell/The News Leader

Wanda Bodkin on Tuesday helps Ron Halterman get started on an exercise bicycle that encourages the muscles in his paralyzed legs to work at Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center.

"We keep Kleenex nearby, just in case."

After 23 minutes, Halterman was just looking for another drink of water. He'd logged 4.1 miles, and the effort showed on his face.

Even as research continues, a diagnosis of a severe spinal cord injury still means paralysis. But when the day comes that Halterman's brain sends messages to his muscles — and they are received — Halterman will be ready.

"The signal from my brain can't get to my legs anymore," he said. "But if there's anyway to make that reconnect again, my legs have to be ready to work again."

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